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The Lincoln of Carl Sandburg

SOME REVIEWS OF "ABRAHAM LINCOLN:
THE WAR YEARS" WHICH, FOR THE AU-
THORITY OF THEIR JUDGMENTS AND THE
GRACE OF THEIR STYLE, DESERVE AT LEAST
THE PERMANENCE OF THIS PAMPHLET; BY

CHARLES A. BEARD

ROBERT E. SHERWOOD

LLOYD LEWIS

HENRY STEELE COMMAGER

MAX LERNER

HENRY BERTRAM HILL

with a background piece from

TIME MAGAZINE

HARCOURT, BRACE AND COMPANY, NEW YORK

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The publishers would have liked to include many more reviews of Carl Sandburg's *Abraham Lincoln: The War Years* than are reprinted here, but the space limitations of this pamphlet necessitated a small selection from the large number of excellent critical pieces elicited by the publication of Mr. Sandburg's work.

This, the first and only edition of *The Lincoln of Carl Sandburg*, is limited to 2500 copies printed from type.

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The Sandburg Lincoln

BY CHARLES A. BEARD

NEVER yet has a history or biography like Carl Sandburg's "Abraham Lincoln: The War Years" appeared on land or sea. Strict disciples of Gibbon, Macaulay, Ranke, Mommsen, Hegel, or Marx will scarcely know what to do with it. It does not enclose the commonplace in a stately diction appropriate for Augustan pomp. Its pages do not stand out in the cold formalism which marks the work of those historians who imagine that they are writing history as it actually was. Nor are the personalities, events, passions, follies, blind stumblings, ridiculous performances, contradictions, and stupidities of the four war years smoothed out to make them fit into "the progressive revelation of the idea of God." The struggle of classes, though more than hinted at, forms no persistent theme employed to explain everything from Lincoln's jokes to Jefferson Davis's views in the spring of 1861.

The opening chapters of Mr. Sandburg's first volume do not present, after the fashion of Macaulay, a picture of American society in 1861—the number, posture, interests, and ideologies of the classes whose spokesmen enact the leading roles. Systematists will not discover anywhere in the four volumes "logical" and self-contained "treatments" of finance, taxation, railways, land policies, tariffs, natural

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Virginia.

resources, labor, and immigration, or the long struggle to curtail the rights of states in the interest of business enterprise. Followers of Lytton Strachey, Gamaliel Bradford, and Freud will look in vain for psychographs of personalities fashioned after their hearts' desires.

But this is not to say that Mr. Sandburg writes "without fear and without research." On the contrary, few if any historians have ever labored harder in preparation for composition. He has traveled widely and searched widely. Great collections of Lincolniana he has scrutinized and used critically. He has examined mountains of newspapers, letters, diaries, pamphlets, stray papers, documents, records, Congressional debates, posters, proclamations, handbills, clippings, pictures, cartoons, and memorabilia, great and small. Work with the paper sources he has supplemented by journeys all over the country, interviews with survivors of the war years and their descendants, and walks over fields and plantations. An indefatigable thoroughness characterizes his preparations and his pages.

In arrangement our author's text is more like a diary or saga than a "systematic presentation." He knows that he cannot tell it all, and says frankly "the teller does the best he can and picks what is to him plain, moving, and important—though sometimes what is important may be tough reading, tangled, involved, sometimes gradually taking on interest, even mystery, because of the gaps and discrepancies." A few chapter titles from the first volume illustrate the flow: "The Use of Patronage," "December '61 Message," "Opinion Makers," "Expectations of McClellan," "Corruption," "White House Children," "Donelson—Grant—Shiloh." Even within chapters there are excursions and diversions which could be put in or left out. Yet when the four volumes are taken together in bulk, it would seem that they form a realistic history of the great conflict and that all parts and passages are so ordered as to give a sense of verisimilitude.

An air of grave thoughtfulness hangs over the lightest words. The searching, brooding spirit of the laborious historian pervades the treatment of every large problem. With this, that, and many things, specialists will doubtless quarrel more or less gently. Mr. Charles Ramsdell, for example, will not be satisfied with the chapter entitled "War Challenge at Sumter." And yet when I place Mr. Ramsdell's essay on the subject down by the side of Mr. Sandburg's chapter, with the best will in the world, I should not like to say on oath which is the truer, that is, which more closely corresponds with the recorded and unrecorded emotions, thoughts, tempers, and actions in the case. But when specialists have finished dissecting, scraping, refining, dissenting, and adding, I suspect that Mr. Sandburg's work will remain for long years to come a noble monument of American literature.

The scene is viewed mainly from the Northern standpoint. The weight of emphasis is on Northern events and personalities, despite the passages on campaigns and battles. There is a chapter on Jefferson Davis and his government, but orthodox Southerners of the Miss Millie Rutherford school will not like it. They will not see the historical necessity of quoting Andy Johnson's outburst about "an illegitimate, swaggering, bastard, scrub aristocracy" in response to Mr. Davis's reflections on "a common blacksmith or tailor." (See Marx.) And, although Mr. Sandburg cites freely many adverse Southern judgments on Lincoln, he sees that strange figure in the White House undamaged by the animadversions. After all, just what is *the* Southern view of the war years or anything else? Moreover, who, North or South, is fitted to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?

Yet Lincoln is not portrayed in these pages as the mighty hero, the great wise man who foresaw things perfectly and moved with unerring wisdom to the great end. He is shown as a poor limited mortal, of many moods, tempers, and dis-

tempers, stumbling, blundering along, trying this and trying that, telling jokes, bewildered, disappointed, grieved by his fractious wife, weeping now, laughing then, ordering this, cancelling that, trying to smooth ruffled personalities, looking upon mankind, like Marcus Aurelius, as composed of little creatures playing and loving, quarrelling and fighting, and making up again, all without much rhyme or reason—Lincoln steadfast in his purpose of saving the Union, and, if possible, reducing the area of slavery or getting rid of it entirely.

There may have been men around Lincoln who were greater (whatever that may mean); many of them at least imagined themselves greater; but I am convinced that Mr. Sandburg's pages will dispel any illusions on this score. Even some cold Puritans correctly educated at Harvard, with many misgivings, and reluctantly, came to the conclusion that even they could scarcely have managed things better in the long run. It was hard for cultivated persons to endure his jokes, his uncouth manners, his unexpected sallies, and yet they at last learned that there was something marvellous in him—an Antaeus possessing the divining powers of a Proteus. Linguistic purists who could speak of Lincoln's style as that of a half-educated lawyer finally saw in the rude texture of his sentences a power that none of them could wield. Mr. Sandburg, I feel sure, has given us a truer and more majestic Lincoln than is to be found in the pages of Nicolay and Hay, those apologists to the bourgeois of the Gilded Age, and a fitting sequel to "The Prairie Years."

A week's reading, which nearly finished my dim eyes, carried me along as in a tumultuous flood, amused, entertained, delighted, toward a conclusion which I had long been maturing. Why is it that the formally educated and polished are so often futile in the presence of vast movements of history? Why is it that so many makers of history on a large scale spring from somewhere near the earth of Antaeus and manage to do things on a colossal scale, dis-

playing profound wisdom in the operation? The answer which I had been darkly maturing, Mr. Sandburg has clinched for me. It is that the great philosophies and systems of thought which adepts pile up, teach, and parade, so far as they are valid for life, derive from a few common-sense aphorisms, fables, and maxims evolved by ordinary humanity in its varied efforts to grapple with the stuff of life. Out of the mouths of babes cometh wisdom. Lincoln was the fablist, the aphorist of the age, strong of will yet supple, facing the storm as farmer wrestles with the toughness of the soil and the tempests of the seasons, and speaking a language, even in crude jokes, which struck the chords of the primordial that endures at or near the bottom of every civilization and carries on when the top has rotted away.

The Lincoln of Carl Sandburg

BY ROBERT E. SHERWOOD

TWENTY years ago Carl Sandburg of Illinois started to write the fullest, richest, most understanding of all the Lincoln biographies. His work is now complete. "The War Years" follows "The Prairie Years" into the treasure house which belongs, like Lincoln himself, to the whole human family. It has been a monumental undertaking; it is grandly realized.

"The War Years" begins where "The Prairie Years" ended, with Lincoln's departure from Springfield—an unknown, threatened, doubted man. It ends with the return of his body to the soil on which it grew. Mr. Sandburg's finest passages are those describing his final journey, and all the immediate aftermaths of the assassination, the shocking effect on men everywhere. Even the wild tribesmen in the Caucasus were asking a traveler, Leo Tolstoy, to tell them of this Western man who was "so great that he even forgave the crimes of his greatest enemies." And Tolstoy told them, "Lincoln was a humanitarian as broad as the world."

"The War Years" is compounded of such quotations. We are enabled to look at Lincoln through thousands of contemporary eyes, including those of Tolstoy, and Jefferson Davis, and John Bright, M.P., and Hendrik Ibsen, and Nathaniel Hawthorne, and a South Carolina lady named

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Mary Chesnut. Mr. Sandburg gives us his own estimates of many other figures, big and little, of the period, but not of Abraham Lincoln. He indulges in no speculation as to what was going on within the heart and soul and mind of this peculiar man. If there is anything lacking in "The War Years," it is the presence of two men of the prairie years, Joshua Speed and William H. Herndon, who saw more deeply into Lincoln than did any others who ever knew him. When Lincoln stepped into the White House he stepped into a great isolation which no one—not even his old friends, Browning and Lamon, nor his secretaries, Nicolay and Hay—seems to have penetrated. In the analyses of his character provided by those who observed him at closest range the word "unfathomable" recurs again and again.

In "The Prairie Years," with fewer documents and many more myths at his disposal, Mr. Sandburg gave greater play to his own lyrical imagination. Anyone can indulge in guess-work about the raw young giant who emerged from the mists of Kentucky, and Indiana, and Sangamon County, Illinois, and Mr. Sandburg's guesses were far better than most. But in "The War Years" he sticks to the documentary evidence, gathered from a fabulous number of sources. He indulges in one superb lyrical outburst at the conclusion of the chapter in which is described the dedication of the cemetery at Gettysburg; and, in the last volume, after John Wilkes Booth has fired the one bullet in his brass derringer pistol, Mr. Sandburg writes with the poetic passion and the somber eloquence of the great masters of tragedy.

Mr. Sandburg's method is unlike that of any biographer since Homer. He starts "The War Years" with the usual appreciative Foreword surveying his source material—and this Foreword provides an excellent survey of Lincolniana—but he reveals the odd nature of his essential research when he says, "Taking my guitar and a program of songs and readings and traveling from coast to coast a dozen times in the last twenty years, in a wide variety of audiences I have

met sons and daughters of many of the leading players in the terrific drama of the Eighteen Sixties." From these sons and daughters he obtained old letters and pictures and clippings, and reminiscences and rumors which led him to upper shelves in remote libraries. Thus, his "program of songs" (like Homer's) brought him into the very spirit of the people, the same people of whom—and by whom, and for whom—was Abraham Lincoln. Quite properly, Mr. Sandburg's great work is not the story of the one man's life. It is a folk biography. The hopes and apprehensions of millions, their loves and hates, their exultation and despair, were reflected truthfully in the deep waters of Lincoln's being, and so they are reflected truthfully in these volumes.

It is less the events than the men and women who made them that concern Mr. Sandburg. He gives relatively scant attention to the tactical, strategic course of Bull Run, the Peninsula, Antietam, Vicksburg and Gettysburg, but he is tireless in his telling of all that can be told of the generals and the privates who fought these battles of victory or defeat. Similarly, he provides many clear portraits of the men who formed the Congress during the Civil War, but leaves the reader in considerable confusion as to just what the Congress *did*. The reader's confusion on this point, however, is no greater than was that of the Congressmen themselves; the fact is that they accomplished next to nothing in the historic task of saving the Union; save as a persistent cause of irritation to Lincoln, they were little more potent than the members of the present Reichstag.

The first volume of "The War Years" contains the dramatis personae of "the terrific drama" and the dismal events of the years 1861-62. Lincoln began his Presidency by sneaking furtively into Washington, disguised, said his many enemies, in an absurdly long military cloak and a Scotch plaid cap. Confronted immediately with the crisis of Fort Sumter, he acted with arbitrary forcefulness, brusquely dismissing the generous offer of the more experienced Seward

to run the country from the State Department. Having grimly assumed leadership and accepted war, Lincoln then proceeded to display weakness and temporizing indecision, which earned for him the contempt of friend and foe. At the end of 1862, he said, beautifully but helplessly, "Fellow-citizens, we cannot escape history. We of this Congress and this Administration will be remembered in spite of ourselves." Had his life then come to an end, he would have been remembered only as one who had haplessly fumbled great responsibility, as one of noble words and feeble deeds. A California Abolitionist newspaper described him as "a driveling, idiotic, imbecile creature." To a disgruntled office seeker who snorted, "Why, I am one of those who made you President!" Lincoln wearily said, "Yes, and it's a pretty mess you got me into." The whole country was indeed a pretty mess of corruption, equivocation, hypocrisy, incompetence, treachery, disunion.

In the second volume, which covers 1863 and the beginning of 1864, we see the great turning point in Lincoln's public life and, consequently, in the course of the Civil War. Mr. Sandburg calls this phase "Storm Center." Out of it comes the Emancipation Proclamation, the first Northern victory at Gettysburg, the assignment of the high command to U. S. Grant, and the Gettysburg Address. In 1864 Lincoln was to face the ordeal of a campaign for re-election. He turned just in time.

The third volume tells of the campaign—Lincoln against George B. McClellan, the arrogant soldier who had been for so long the undeserving beneficiary of Lincoln's incredible patience, at whose hands the President of the United States had accepted humiliation. August, 1864, was "the darkest month of the war," and so low was Lincoln's stock that his party moved to replace him with another candidate. Quoting from a Miss Wentworth, who described a visit to Lincoln's office at this time and saw the hordes of petitioners and protesters who were forever surging in, Mr.

Sandburg tells a poignant, revealing story. A Catholic priest said to the President, "I should like a private interview." "I do nothing privately," was the calm answer. "All I do is public." Could the bitterness of loneliness in high station be better expressed? Mr. Sandburg quotes the dying Hawthorne, and his words have a strange significance for bewildered people of today:

"The Present, the Immediate, the Actual, has proved too potent for me. It takes away not only my scanty faculty, but even my desire for imaginative composition, and leaves me sadly content to scatter a thousand peaceful fantasies upon the hurricane that is sweeping us all along with it, possibly, into a limbo where our nation and its polity may be as literally the fragments of a shattered dream as my unwritten romance."

After Lincoln's re-election, which occasioned great astonishment among British Tories, who assumed that this vulgar fellow would be buried by hostile ballots, *The London Spectator* uttered this remarkably sage observation: "This journal alone in England has pointed out steadily, not as an argument, but as the one necessary datum for argument, that *the American Republic is not in times of excitement governed by its talking class.*" (The italics are this reviewer's.) Mr. Sandburg quotes *The Spectator* frequently and gives it a high rating among the world's journals in its power to estimate Lincoln.

The fourth volume of "The War Years" begins with Lincoln's political triumph, the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment, covers the second inaugural, Sherman's march to the sea, Grant's final victory at Richmond, the performance at Ford's Theatre on the evening of Good Friday, the funeral, of which Mr. Sandburg says:

"The line of march ran seventeen hundred miles. . . . It was garish, vulgar, massive, bewildering, chaotic. Also it was

simple, final, majestic, august. In spite of some of its mawkish excess of show and various maudlin proceedings, it gave solemn, unforgettable moments to millions of people who had counted him great, warm and lovable. The people, the masses, nameless and anonymous numbers of persons not listed nor published among those present—these redeemed it."

In this last volume of his mighty work, Mr. Sandburg does not forget Mrs. Chesnut, who was writing, down in Lincolnton, N. C., "Shame, disgrace, beggary, all have come at once, and are hard to bear—the grand smash! Rain, rain, outside, and naught but drowning floods of tears inside."

Any review of "The War Years" at this time can be no more than a smattering report of quickly remembered fragments. It is so great a work that it will require great reading and great reflection before any true appreciation of its permanent value can be formed. It will beget many other books. But, in the meantime, the people of this nation and this human race may well salute and thank Carl Sandburg for the magnitude of his contribution to our common heritage.

Carl Sandburg Sings the “Lincoln-Music”

BY LLOYD LEWIS

THE PRESIDENT of the United States was down for a few perfunctory “dedicatory remarks,” in the formal christening of a national graveyard for soldiers on Nov. 16, 1863, at Gettysburg. There had been vast slaughter there in July, and too many of the dead had been so carelessly buried that the plows of Pennsylvania farmers were catching in their bones. Now the nation, aroused, was making the burial legal, official, eternal.

Mr. Lincoln hadn’t time to get up much of a speech, even for the four or five minutes allotted him. The big oration of the day was to be given by the country’s most classical orator, Edward Everett. Besides, it was a question as to how many people would listen to Lincoln, anyway. The big men of the Republican party weren’t going. They asked each other, “Why bother with a man who’s finished as a political leader? He can’t be re-elected next year. Why go hear the dead bury the dead?”

Lincoln’s time was crowded with appointments and duties in the days before the event, and there was a wedding to go to, so he didn’t get much done on the speech. Furthermore the one person to whom he was closest in the world, his tongue-tied little boy, Tad, was sick, the doctors unable to tell what was the matter, and Mrs. Lincoln, already drifting toward the insanity which was to claim

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THE WORN BUT LIGHTED ABRAHAM LINCOLN. *From the Meserve collection*

PRESIDENT LINCOLN VISITS ARMY OF THE POTOMAC HEADQUARTERS, OCTOBER, 1862.
Photograph in Gardner Album No. 1, from the Barrett collection



her, was hysterical. She had lost one young son already in the White House.

So, what with everything, the President didn't do very well when his time came to give his little five-minute talk to the crowd. Sitting down while polite perfunctory applause pattered, he told an old friend beside him that he wished he'd gotten the thing up with more care; that it was "a flat failure and the people are disappointed."

He was silent on the railroad train going back to Washington that night, and lay on one of the side seats with a wet towel across his eyes. . . . *The London Times* noted that Lincoln's little speech simply couldn't be beaten for dullness.

The towering irony of all this comes creeping up, inch by inch, detail by detail, as Carl Sandburg tells it in his new four-volume biography of Lincoln during the Civil War years. The full drama of it comes as Sandburg once said the fog comes, "on little cat's feet." Up to this point Sandburg, the biographer, has led the reader by the hand, talking to him prosaically, calmly, interestingly, thoughtfully but not often like the Sandburg who had made the hickory woods ring with music thirteen years ago in his two volumes, "Abraham Lincoln: the Prairie Years."

But now, now that the creaking lamp-lit train has taken Lincoln back to Washington, and the disappointed crowds have gone home from Gettysburg, Sandburg keeps the reader with him in the deserted cemetery—the two of them standing there alone in the bivouac of the dead.

And now it is (on page 476 of Volume Two) that the gray-haired icon of Swedish ancestors throws off the mantle of the biographer, the academic robes of the scholar, and lifting his bass voice, begins to sing. Always a master of timing, as anyone who has heard his platform singing knows, Sandburg senses that now is the time to loose the Lincoln-music that has been charging itself up in his heart. The time has come to be himself, the poet.

And so he sings—"The blue haze of the Cumberland Mountains dimmed till it was a blur in a nocturne. The moon was up and fell with a bland, golden benevolence on the new-made graves of soldiers." As he sings, the listener knows that here is the greatest requiem for dead Union soldiers since Walt Whitman—and maybe "When lilacs last in the dooryard bloom'd" is no greater, even so.

From the darkening hill, the singer looks out over America into quiet farmhouses where the lamps are lit and people listening to the tick-tock of a tall, old clock and thinking how never again would the boy be coming in from milking the cows and saying, "What's the time?" The boy was up in that graveyard, there at Gettysburg.

But there are relatively few such melodies in this monumental biography. Rather is it a massive symphony, like one of Beethoven's, with the overtones more powerful than the notes themselves.

The thirteen years' active work that Sandburg poured into these four volumes, are years in which a poet trained himself to be a researcher, collecting tens of thousands of quotations, notes, excerpts, learning all about evidence. It has been the best research job yet done on Lincoln—possibly on any American—yet Sandburg, when he comes to printing his results, discards the conventional technique of the historian. He abandons footnotes. Many of his sources are implied in the text, the rest are there on the authority of his own integrity. He boldly flings more than 100,000 words—longer than the average novel—into one chapter. He halts again and again in his pursuit of the mysterious Lincoln to insert one-page, two-page, three-page sketches of contemporary characters. The best of these, just as it is always the best in any Civil War or Reconstruction book that attempts the method, is that of Thaddeus Stevens. But never before was Old Thad so well summarized:

"At his worst a clubfooted wrangler possessed of endless javelins; at his best a majestic and isolated figure wandering

in an ancient wilderness thick with thorns, seeking to bring justice between man and man."

Sandburg throws in touching incidents as when, in the middle of the great war, thirty-eight Indians are hanged in Minnesota, many of them holding hands on the scaffold and tossing their war bonnets and shouting to each other: "I am here. I am here."

There are dramatic stories of soldiers, privates and officers, although the fighting is but a small part of the book and the battles are each dismissed with a brief, sharply worded, beautifully balanced summary. The story of the war is only there because it told on Lincoln, wearing him down, draining even his limitless reservoir of human sympathy, till toward the end he was to say: "Sometimes I think I'm the tiredest man on earth."

There has probably never been such a summoning of witnesses before in American literature or law, no such marshalling of incident, such sifting of rumor, such collecting of evidence, eye-witness and hearsay, as the author here produces. They illumine the manifold cares of the President, the Union's political crisis, the draft chaos, the impact of the war upon housewives, Europeans, Negro slaves. In the thirty-odd years across which he has been collecting Lincolniana, Sandburg has gone everywhere he heard a Lincoln letter or an observation on the man might be stored. And his product is, like his poems, a singularly eloquent use of contemporary anecdote and language. What people said about Lincoln, what they saw him do, what they heard he said and did—it is all here, as detailed as Dostoevsky, as American as Mark Twain.

What lifts the book above mere stupendous anecdote—and it is very funny every few pages—is the thoughtful, searching comment of the collector. Each anecdote and incident is fastened to the growing pyramidal monument by the cement of Sandburg's particular feeling for the form of words—and of Lincoln's character. The method enables

the author to pile up, along with the monument to Lincoln, another one—one to the people of the time. They are to be seen, singly and in mass—and to be heard. An orator toasts Jeff Davis—"May he be chained in the southwest corner of hell and a northwest wind blowing ashes in his eyes to all eternity."

An old Sangamon County farmer-friend of Abe's youth bursts into the White House saying, "Hello Abe, how are ye? I'm in line and hev come fer an orfice, too." Lincoln, from his crowded desk, tells him "to hang onto himself and not kick the traces," then, when a chance comes, talks with him and sees the old man's lip tremble as he says, "Martha's dead, the gal is married and I've guv Jim the forty." He said he knowed he wasn't eddicated enough to get the political place he wanted, "but I kinder want to stay where I kin see Abe Linkern."

Horace Greeley flounces through in his linen duster saying, "Of all horned cattle, the most helpless in a printing office is a college graduate." Sojourner Truth, the Negro woman preacher, when accused by a Copperhead audience of being a man, solemnly shows her aged breasts from the pulpit and speaks such terrible scorn that her critics shrivel and slink away. The elegant John Hay sees the President talking with Tennessee mountaineers and writes, "He is one of them really." Wendell Phillips, the Abolitionist with the scalding tongue, says of Southerners: "They don't know how to do anything in peace. They don't know how to open a jackknife." A Republican re-elected to Congress in the surprisingly large indorsement of Lincoln says, "The Almighty must have stuffed the ballot boxes." Grant, stubby, bashful, "in tarnished blue" comes out of the West at Lincoln's call, blunders with characteristic directness into a swallow-tailed reception and suffers in agony as he is lionized.

Incidentally, Grant and Sherman grow upon Sandburg as his volumes progress. They may be seen to capture the

author as he meets each added proof of their extraordinary intelligence in military matters. As for McClellan, the author leans backward in fairness, but the massed evidence leaves "Little Mac" smaller than ever in history. Toward Ben Butler, Sandburg is doggedly bitter, his own blood so stirred by Ben's chicaneries that he misses almost altogether the wit, the humor, the impudent comedy as well as the paradoxical friendship for the poor that make some other researchers fascinated with the character.

Lincoln, under this closest and largest of microscopes ever held on him, may be said now to take his place as unquestionably the most admirable of Americans judged by what Americans regard as admirable. Balanced against what his advocates said of him and his acts, are the fiercest things his opponents said. What emerges is a figure of infinite patience and adroitness, a poet as sad as Dante, a comedian as epigrammatic, upon occasion, as Oscar Wilde (albeit, really, in a different language), a humorist of foremost rating, an executive capable of administering a practical autocracy with charm and with a modesty frequently bordering upon the sacrificial, an independent artist whose almost-Shakespearean handling of words caused the British Richard Cobden to conclude that he "never troubled himself with etiquette or dignification speaking or writing . . . without a care as to how grammarians may dissent what he utters or what the salons may pass upon his taste," a philosopher who could inspire his highly literate secretary to say, "He can rake a sophism out of its hole better than all the trained logicians of all schools. . . . There is no man in the country so wise, so gentle and so firm."

Lincoln was in himself so large a mirror of mankind that every biographer finds in him the thing he admires most, hence lawyers think Lincoln's legal side the thing that made him great, soldiers think his education in handling soldiers the main thing in his fame, preachers say it was his exalted moral sense, and Sandburg the writer, while giving the most

catholic of evaluations to date, would seem, by his emphasis, to feel that it was as a user of words that Lincoln shone the brightest. And the evidence goes far to support such a view. To read Sandburg's detailed description of how Lincoln wrote his most renowned papers, speeches and letters, of what was in the air at the moment, is as absorbing as it would be suddenly to come across the revelation of just how Shakespeare wrote "Hamlet."

The letter in which Lincoln used the immortal sentence, "The Father of Waters goes unvexed to the sea" is lifted to parity with the Gettysburg Address and the soaringly eloquent Second Inaugural, as Sandburg sets and expands it.

Indeed, one of Lincoln's best remarks might have been made by Sandburg, himself—Lincoln was talking of a correspondent whose handwriting was so full of flourishes that it obscured the sense of the words—"That reminds me of a short-legged man in an overcoat with a tail so long it wiped out his footprints in the snow."

Sandburg was born for this particular job, and it has waited for him. A great American democrat has come at last to his most sympathetic and, at the same time, his most searchingly detailed portrait at the hands of another great American democrat. And the portrait seems, at this writing, destined to be one of the tallest sycamores in the forest of American literature, one of the landmarks in the history of our writing.

But more important than that is the simple fact that when all of Lincoln's acts have been given the fullest examination, when quantities of little known incidents and stories have been resurrected, when the synthesis of massed evidence has been taken, the man emerges quite as the American people have visualized him. The most minute examination leaves him substantially where the people have fixed him in their affections.

The people knew all along—the people, yes!

Lincoln Belongs to the People

BY HENRY STEELE COMMAGER

LINCOLN and Lee are the folk heroes and the symbols of the American people, representative of what was best in North and South, in the democratic and the aristocratic principle; representative, too, of the forces of inheritance and environment, the one the finished product of an old society, the other the roughhewn offspring of the frontier. To Lee Mr. Douglas Freeman raised a noble and appropriate literary monument, as elegant and symmetrical as Arlington itself; but the son of poor Nancy Hanks has had to wait longer for his biography, thousands of eager authors singing his praises, but none, until now, penetrating to his character, encompassing the whole of him, explaining his meaning and his fame. "It will require an altogether new breed and school of historians," observed one contemporary, "to begin to do justice to this type-man. . . . No ponderously eloquent George Bancroft can properly rehearse those inimitable stories, nor can even the genius of a Washington Irving or an Edward Everett in some future age elocutionize into the formal dignity of a Greek statue the kindly but powerful face of Mr. Lincoln."

And Carl Sandburg is of this new school, himself the child of the prairies, a man of the people, their poet and their champion. The poets have always understood Lincoln,

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from Whitman and Emerson to Lindsay and Benét, and it is fitting that from the pen of a poet should come the greatest of all Lincoln biographies, one of the great biographies of our literature. It is great in the reflected beauty and honesty of its subject; it is great, too, in the telling. It is such a biography as Lincoln himself would have wished and would have understood: genuine, simple, broad, humane, dramatic, poetic, thoroughly American in its muscular, idiomatic words, in its humor, in its catholicity and democracy.

It is not a pretentious work, not even a formidable one, for all its twenty-four hundred closely knit pages; it is not primarily a work of scholarship, for all its thousands of weighty facts, so zealously collected from every source. What gives it value is its indubitable authenticity, and that is achieved by a massing of pertinent detail, an array of relevant stories, statistics, conversations, reports, documents, anecdotes, verses, editorials, sermons, portraits, such as has rarely been given us in any biographical work. Perhaps this is not the whole of the Civil War, but it is difficult to believe that this is not the whole of Lincoln during the war years.

It is, indeed, a Gargantuan book, overwhelming as the prairies, massive, irresistible. In its pages Lincoln comes to life, and with him a whole society, the gallant generals and the rash ones, spoils-men snarling for office and statesmen striking attitudes for posterity, millionaires reaping war profits, speculators greasing their way South, dignified authors and professional humorists, soldiers and soldiers' wives, contrabands, the representatives of the people, and the people themselves. All of them came to Lincoln, told their stories, argued their causes, heard his jokes, and went home to write about it and to contribute to the legend. And because, in the end, all things centered on Lincoln, this biography becomes a history of a whole people, a panorama and a pageant.

It is a story complex and fascinating; the vigor of the narrative never falters, the interest never flags, from those remarkable opening chapters which reveal the bewilderment of Lincoln and of his countrymen in the face of the crisis of '61 to those moving chapters which tell of the President martyred and mourned. And here is the whole of the war President, nothing of importance omitted, much heretofore thought unimportant now appreciated. It is all narrative, the analysis takes care of itself, the interpretation is implicit in the material and the presentation. The technique is that of an attack in force; Sandburg masses his facts in regiments, marches them in and takes the field, and the conquest is palpable and complete. We have known, of course, how office seekers plagued Lincoln, splitting parties, endangering the Union, in their eagerness for spoils; here are the facts, literally hundreds of pages of them, case after case, until it comes to seem the most real thing about the Administration. We are familiar with the opposition of the Radicals; here we see them in all their fierce sincerity and their narrow vindictiveness, working incessantly to have their way with Lincoln and with the Negro and with the South, and we see how Lincoln managed them and appeased them and conciliated them and fought them—Frémont in the field, Sumner in the White House, Stevens in Congress, Phillips in the public arena. We have been told the story of Lincoln as military commander; in these pages the war problems are intimate and immediate—how to get action out of Scott, how to feed the vanity of McClellan, how to console Hooker, how to use all the talents of Stanton but circumvent his hardness, which soldiers to pardon, which commissions to sign, which generals to retain and which to remove. We have heard—how often—the Lincoln stories and jokes, and it would seem that here surely there were only diminishing returns, but Sandburg gives us all the old ones illuminated with fresh meaning, and a host of new ones, and the effect is never trivial—it is consequential.

But best of all is Sandburg's genius for re-creating the men and women whose lives affected Lincoln and so our history. There is a lavishness here that is unique in our biographical literature; the familiar figures are here, strutting and fretting their way across the stage, and hundreds of the less familiar who had their hour and whose hour is resurrected and remembered. We expect Sumner and McClellan and Grant and Lamon and Butler; it is delightful to meet the ubiquitous but shadowy Count Gurowski, insanely vindictive but imposing and shrewd, the gallant Major General Ormsby Mitchel whom Halleck feared, the slave orator Sojourner Truth who was ready to prove that she was a woman, the fantastic pamphleteer Anna Ella Carroll, the vulgar Colonel Baker of the Detective Bureau, Mrs. Louis Harvey who got three hospitals—and dozens of others, candidates now for fame.

And it is all endlessly quotable. Here is old General Scott—"When he walked, he seemed almost a parade by himself. When he paused, the apparent parade halted. Small boys waited of a morning to see him come out of his house and move, like six regiments, towards a waiting carriage. What with age, dropsy, vertigo, and old bullets to carry, he could no longer mount a horse." And, across the James, there was Jeff Davis: "He could argue down other men and see them fumble as they failed to answer him, but what went on in the other man's mind he did not know or could not guess, for he had never formed the habit of trying to get inside other men in that way. His personal dignity was peculiar and deep, and he was ready to lose comparative paradise and go to a superlative hell for it."

And what of the Lincoln who emerges from these growing pages? He is the familiar Lincoln, made a hundredfold more familiar. He is a bewildered man who never entirely understood how he came to be President at a great crisis in history, and was saved by humility. He is a shrewd man who was able to apply the cunning of the Illinois circuit

to the business of managing Congressmen. He is a rough man who never learned the proprieties of office, never learned to dress well or accept the usages of diplomacy or the requirements of polite society, and who made that a badge of democracy. He is a kindly man who, faced with the tragedy of war, took on himself the woes of a whole people and came to seem a symbol of the atonement. He is a gregarious man who used his friends and acquaintances for his own purposes and for larger purposes which they rarely understood. He is a tolerant man who developed tolerance into such magnanimity as no other national leader has ever revealed in a similar crisis. He is the Illinois lawyer, the prairie politician, who rose magnificently to the greatest responsibility ever laid upon one man and by his victory over himself, over the politicians and the generals, over the war spirit and the profit spirit, over the enemy in the South and in the North and the critics abroad, vindicated the democratic theory. He is the common man, who knows that

“In the midst of battle there is room
For thoughts of love, and in foul sin for mirth,”

and who displayed a forbearance that was saintly, a humor that was cleansing, and met war and evil and overcame them.

All this Mr. Sandburg has revealed to us, with learning, with imagination, with poetry. He has not involved us in the intricacies of controversy, he has not burdened us with the apparatus of scholarship, he has not confronted us with theories or interpretations. He has realized that Lincoln belongs to the people, not to the historians, and he has given us a portrait from which a whole generation may draw understanding of the past and inspiration for the future.

Lincoln as War Leader

BY MAX LERNER

WITH these four volumes Carl Sandburg completes the life of Lincoln begun in "The Prairie Years." Taking the total achievement, there is nothing in historical literature that I know quite comparable with it.

I generally distrust the meeting of perfect writer and perfect theme. There is a blueprint seemliness about such conjunctions that rarely issues in a creative product. The surprising thing about Sandburg writing on Lincoln is that in this case the results are good: the democrat, the poet, the story-teller, the earthy Midwesterner, the singer of the people, has managed somehow to write about another democrat who was also something of a poet in his way and a vast story-teller and an earthy Midwesterner and a product of the popular mass. He has sought to depict him on a canvas broader than anything else in American biography: over 2,000 pages of text, hundreds of illustrations, a hundred pages of index. Even the four-volume Beveridge "Marshall," expanded by long discussions of cases and decisions, seems dwarfed. Sandburg has brought to his theme a brooding vigor and compassion, a precision of detail, a lyricism, a gusto for people and experience, that would be hard to match among American writers. And the work he has given us is not only a biography of Lincoln and a history of the

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Civil War. It is itself a battlefield, a sprawling panorama of people and issues and conflicts held together only by Sandburg's absorption with the central figure.

The historian's art has been narrowed by the academies to the point of making people believe that there is only one right way of setting down a history. Sandburg's way is as characteristically his own as Carlyle's was when he wrote of Cromwell. It is the right way for him because through it he can best express his own basic drives and outlook. He is in these books three things: reporter, poet, lover.

As reporter he sets down what happened with the athletic matter-of-factness that the best journalists put into their craft. But it is a reporter who has a million and a half words at his disposal, and so Sandburg empties his notebooks into his pages. But while nothing is too minute to be put in, there are no superfluous interpretations. The facts are allowed to speak for themselves, yet almost always they are so arranged (with a simplicity that almost conceals the cunning) that they do speak and have something to say. And Sandburg has the reporter's passion for concreteness. We always learn the exact numbers of everything, the exact look of everyone who enters the story. There is something even a bit frightening about the detail. I think I can understand Sandburg's intent: the Lincoln literature has grown so vast that a definitive factual work was needed to gather together everything available and valid. The result has one great flaw: the sense one gets of a curious one-dimensional plane, in which the detail gets the same loving attention as the big event, at a considerable sacrifice of perspective. Sandburg is a little like a painter in the primitive style. He is your true democratic historian. In his universe all facts, once they have been validated, are free and equal. Yet he gives his material thereby an unforced character that should cause the biographers who come after him to bless him.

There is also Sandburg the poet. A poet turning to biography and history is likely to flaunt his Muse or, by an in-

version, to be ashamed of it and suppress it. Not Sandburg. The America of Lincoln, the teeming years of suffering and battle and greatness, lie drenched in the moonlight of his lyricism. The Sandburg here is the Sandburg of the Chicago poems, celebrating America and the obscure ways of life, setting his words down with neither elegance nor precision but with a curious random obliqueness that nevertheless manages almost always to reach its object. "Out of the smoke and the stench, out of the music and violet dreams of the war, Lincoln stood perhaps taller than any other of the many great heroes." Thus Sandburg. What biographer who was not Sandburg's kind of poet would dare say "music and violet dreams" when describing war, or juxtapose "violet dreams" with "the smoke and the stench"? Yet while there are passages verging on the dithyrambic, particularly at the end of chapters, the whole tone of the book has a quietness and restraint that only one who has mastered his subject and is sure of it could afford.

I have mentioned Sandburg the lover. I know of no other word that will describe the twelve years spent in wooing the material, the care lavished on every detail; or the complete identification with the subject that allows him to analyze Lincoln without once raising his voice in shrillness, and with the effortlessness of what might almost be an introspective reverie. Nor do I know of any other word to describe the deep and shrewd tenderness for common people throughout the book, such as one might expect from the author of "*The People, Yes.*"

Sandburg has evidently taken care not to write the sort of contemporary book that underlines the parallels between yesterday and today. He has given us Lincoln the man, Lincoln the war President, America in the war years. If there are morals to be drawn for today, he has left it to us to draw them.

I am not averse to drawing my own. But one does not

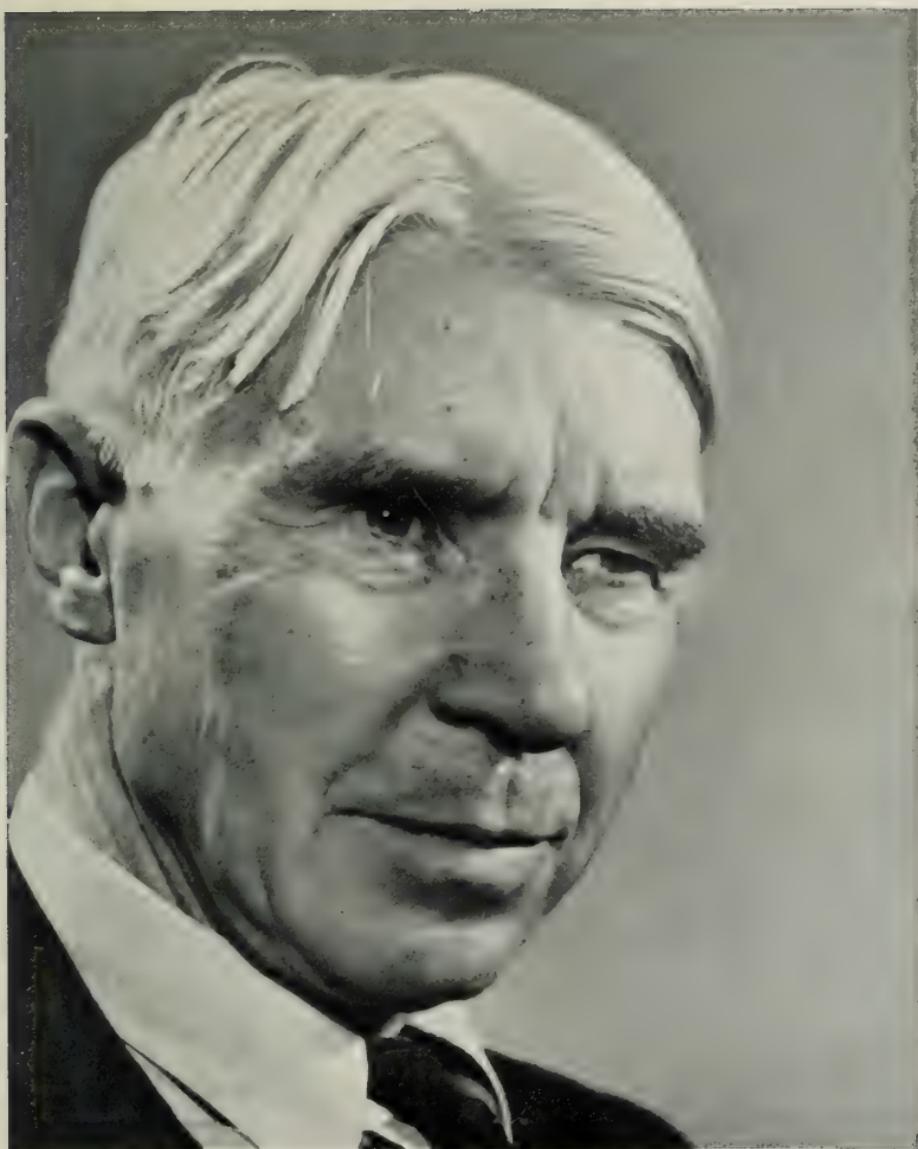
need the stimulus of the modern instance to find excitement in the task of human interpretation that every Lincoln biographer has faced. Sandburg's Lincoln stands out not for its sharpness of thesis but for its very lack of the monistic view. It has a catholicity and an unforced quality that are rare in biography, without succumbing to mere straddling and the colorless. One gets the external man and the internal tensions. There is no attempt to prettify, to play down crudities and failings; neither is there any hint of exploiting them. All the lumbering awkwardness of the man is there, his gropings and fumbling, the way he entered the reception room at the White House and made people feel he was the man in the room who was least at home. But the simplicity of the man is also there—a simplicity which, in Emerson's phrase about him, was "the perfection of manners."

Throughout the book we find ourselves on the verge of the symbolic. To quote Emerson again on Lincoln: "He exerts the enormous power of this continent in every hour, in every conversation, in every act." Sandburg spells that out in detail, while he never lets us lose the sense of the symbolic relation between Lincoln and the American energies. And he manages also to convey Lincoln's tortured sense that there had been imposed on him a task too great for human to bear. It is here that one strikes the deepest chord in Lincoln. The fatality of it: that he, with his tenderness for everything living, should become the instrument of death for tens of thousands; that he, who always saw the danger of men's control over men, should have in his hand the destinies of millions; that he, who always shrank from action, should at the peril of his people be galvanized into a train of actions with vast inscrutable consequences. From this standpoint there are two peaks in the book: the chapter on Lincoln's laughter and religion, and the analysis of how Lincoln had to tell his stories in order to relieve the intolerable tensions within him; and the chapters on the assassination and the country's mourning. To the latter espe-

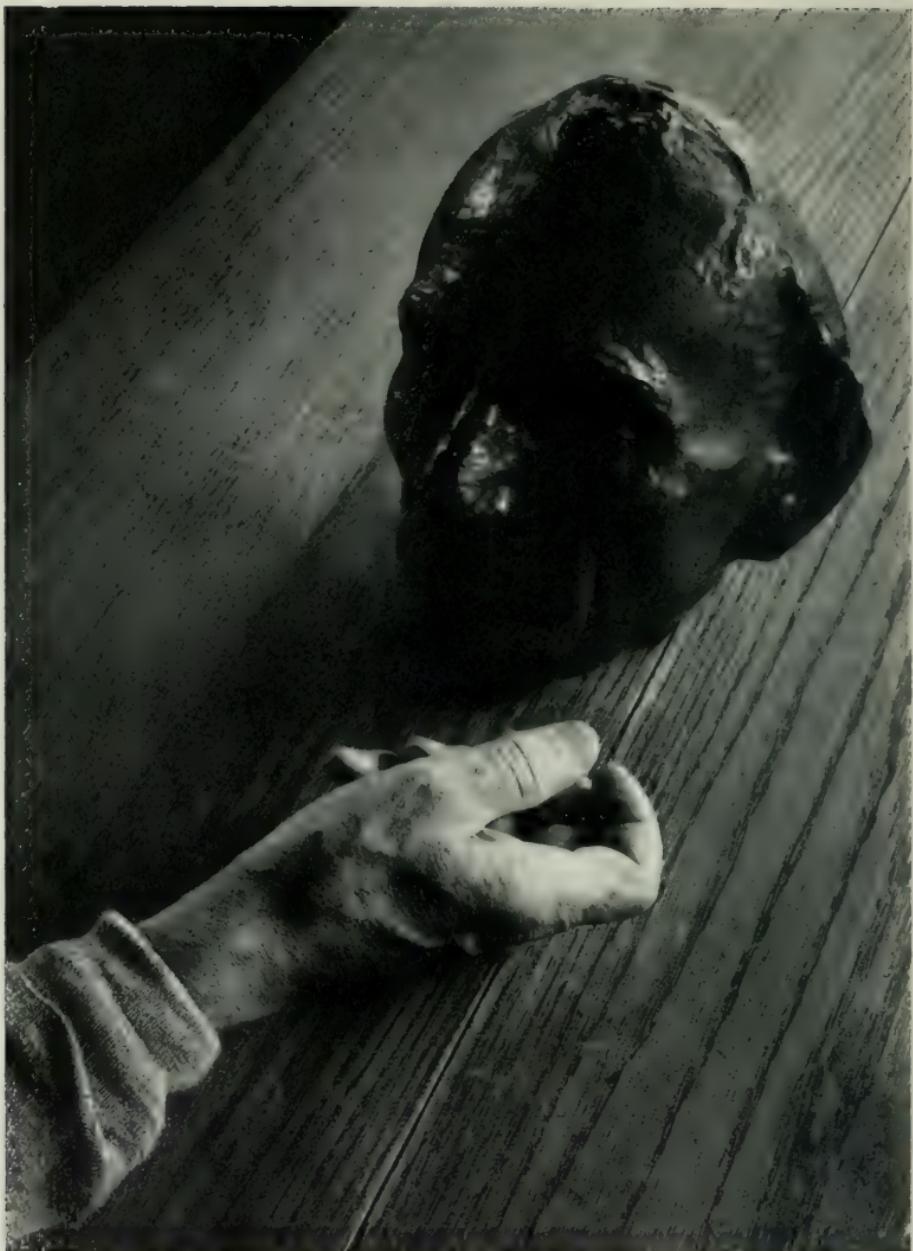
cially Sandburg brings his most complete gifts, telling the story with the subdued reverence of a passion play, and with a fatality as if the actors were moving in a dream. Here one reaches great writing.

It is a bit of luck for us that these volumes should appear just when the question of the conduct of the war by democracies is so much in our minds. One will not find here, as in the Baker volumes on Wilson, much discussion of the now frayed theme of American neutrality. But there is a store of stuff on the question of what happens to a democracy when it goes to war.

Lincoln has gone down in American history as one of the "strong" Presidents, who flouted constitutional restrictions and established a dictatorship in order to win the war. The view is not without its truth. Yet never has a government waged as fierce a war as Lincoln had to wage, and departed so little from the democratic spirit. Lincoln the war President, Lincoln the Commander-in-Chief of the national armies, Lincoln who suspended *habeas corpus* when it seemed an indispensable measure and who backed up the arrest and expulsion of Vallandigham by General Burnside—that Lincoln never ceased to be also Lincoln the humanist and Lincoln the democrat. He was sore pressed as no American President has ever been. He made mistakes, but as one reads the Sandburg volumes they seem to have been mainly on the side of excessive tolerance rather than lust for power. He had to deal with all the plagues that beset a war government—the militarist mind, the messianic mind, the bureaucratic mind; with war passions and hysteria; with patriots, with the lynching spirit, with lethargy, with an opposition so bitter it verged continually on sabotage and treason. He had no genius for organization, little capacity for delegation, little administrative ability as it is generally understood. But with all these limitations he never once lost sight of the main chance. He had a way of cleaving to the



CARL SANDBURG. *Photograph by Eric Schaal*



LINCOLN LIFE MASK AND CARL SANDBURG'S HAND.
Photograph by Edward Steichen. Courtesy of "U. S. Camera"

heart of a problem that baffled subtler and more expert and sophisticated minds. There were men around him with more powerful wills, men with a greater commitment to humanitarian and radical values. But there was no one who saw better than Lincoln the dilemma and task of a democracy at war: how to win the war with the minimum sacrifice of traditional liberties and democratic values.

In a world in which the leaders of war democracies are the Daladiers and Chamberlains and Churchills, we have reason to be proud of Lincoln. We have reason to be proud that with every opportunity for setting up a dictatorship, he did not succumb; with every opportunity for betraying democratic values under the guise of war necessity, he did not succumb. Long before the end of the war he was giving his best thought to the problem of a humane peace and a constructive plan for rebuilding the defeated states. I have no intention of saying that Lincoln was wholly consistent in the strength of his humanism. There were forces in American life that proved too powerful for him, for the cause of the North was tied up with the cause of a predatory capitalism, and the Reconstruction that followed Lincoln's death was almost arid of either democratic or human values. Yet there was never a time when it was more important for us than now to know the capacity of a democracy to turn up greatness of Lincoln's sort from its humblest sons—a greatness that will survive the grime and savagery of war.

If I read my own Lincoln somewhat into Sandburg's pages, there is room for others as well. He has given the coming generations the material out of which to construct a myriad of Lincoln images. All the material is there—from the day that Lincoln boarded the train at Springfield to ride to his inauguration, down to the day when his coffin was placed in a flower-heaped vault in the Springfield he had left. What four years were crowded between those two boundaries! The hordes of people, office seekers, hand-

shakers; the jokes and stories, deep, illimitable stories, lighting up what was comic and contradictory in life; the grim wild humor of a President-elect conferring with his advisers as to how he might travel through Baltimore on his way to his inauguration without being lynched; the Cabinet officers, with their intrigues and jealousies; the vast decisions and petty details; the generals, and the heart-breaking search for military leadership that would be confident and firm and aggressive; the violent attacks in Congress and the press; the drama of emancipation, and the harrowing uncertainty of its consequences; Father Abraham; the seesawing of war's fortunes; the draft riots, the desertions, the Copperheads; the unending delegations of politicians and ministers and zealots and cranks; Jay Cooke and the financing of the war; the profiteering and poverty, at one extreme costly furs bought with war profits, at the other the starving families of soldiers; the European diplomats and statesmen puzzled by this ungainly fellow who told crude stories; the faith of the masses, growing and deepening every year; the rows of hospital cots, the faces pleading and rebuking; the dream of sudden death and the deep inner conviction that it would come; the unerring course of Booth's bullet; Whitman's threnody; the grief of the people. And then the legend.

Sandburg's Lincoln Monument

BY HENRY BERTRAM HILL

CARL SANDBURG has fulfilled the great ambition of his life—fulfilled it in six massive volumes on Abraham Lincoln which will probably remain the enduring written story of the Great Emancipator and the permanent measuring rod of his biographers. Two of the volumes, "The Prairie Years," appeared fourteen years ago; the last four volumes, now published as "The War Years," complete the portrait.

Even if Carl Sandburg were not Carl Sandburg this biography would be important as a monument of scholarship. Through its author's hands has passed more Lincoln material than has ever been seen before by a single person. He has lived with it, absorbed it until it has become his own. It is doubtful if even Lincoln's secretaries, Nicolay and Hay, knew the man and his time so well, so deeply, so understandingly.

But knowledge and comprehension alone, important as they are, do not produce the kind of masterpiece that this is. It takes an awareness of tone and subtle emphasis, a sensing that a great story is best told simply and plainly, a realization that restraint is the straightest arrow in the quiver. Carl Sandburg knows this, and through the first three of these last four volumes the narrative moves in an unadorned

From *The Kansas City Star*. Copyright, 1939, *The Kansas City Star*.

and colloquial style. Much of it is in the words of Lincoln and his contemporaries, with Sandburg a quiet but ever present interlocutor. Whenever necessary he steps in to pick up the thread, to give the details of some event or its background, to sketch the life of some essential character. He does this scores of times, upon each occasion producing a living episode or man.

No Detail Is Missed

Nothing is too small in the life of Lincoln or the nation to escape Sandburg's attention. He reaches into all walks of society, into every nook and cranny of the country to find episodes and anecdotes, handbills and editorials, sermons and songs. A great many of them are trivial and inconsequential in themselves, but each cuts a new facet, however small, or adds luster to a familiar one, and together the sheer weight of them produces an encompassing effect of reality. At times, it is true, the slow heaviness of them weighs upon the reader, as it does in the long series of anecdotes and White House interviews in the third volume.

But the fourth volume brings the third into its proper meaning and perspective. It is a slow interlude which builds up a preparation for the last. In it the simplicity continues, but the restraint is lifted. Its final chapters are filled with a pure lyrical rhapsody at the full height of Sandburg's art. Together with the sweeping effect of the earlier volumes it produces the noblest contribution so far made to the apotheosis of Lincoln.

And yet it is something more than that. It is plain that Lincoln's greatness did not come from a possession of astounding genius or flashing brilliance. It came in part from his humanness and apparent humility as represented privately in his many pardons and letters, and publicly in the almost Biblical measure of the Gettysburg Address and the last paragraph of the Second Inaugural. All this is com-

mon pabulum for the usual biographer of Lincoln, but never before has that other part of the man, his closeness to the people, been so thoroughly and so well displayed. Perhaps that is because no other biographer of Lincoln has himself been so close to the earth and its human inhabitants, possessed of so much of Lincoln's animal warmth and simplicity.

Leader of the People

Abraham Lincoln never led in the sense of pulling; he led by gently beckoning from a step ahead, or he helped to shape events and then let himself be prodded to move in the direction he had hoped to go. Sandburg keeps this role of common men and women ever in the foreground, and thus these volumes in reality constitute an apotheosis of the American people as well as of Lincoln as the great exemplar of their essential worth and goodness.

In this way Carl Sandburg has fortified the growth and continuation of a myth. As straight history, the more prosaic life of Lincoln by Lord Charnwood contains a better balanced judgment. For its sobering effect probably the more curious reader should turn the pages of Edgar Lee Masters's peevish and pestilential biography. But neither of these present the Lincoln who will live down through the ages in the imagination of the people. He has been enshrined, as Sandburg has rightly sensed, because his life and the circumstances of the moment he occupied provided a pattern into which there could be transplanted a configuration of the nobility of man. It is true that Lincoln had his baser side, and so too with the men immediately around him and with the masses in the background, but Sandburg is a tolerant and kindly judge. To him, as to Lincoln, people can be trusted in the long run. They may at times be weak, and even wrong, but inevitably and in the main they are good.

If such a judgment is incorrect then so also is Sandburg's

portrait of Lincoln. Those who admire the mechanical technique of the historian might agree that it is wrong, but just how accurate would such an estimate be? Myths are what men live by. All civilization is a myth, the hopes and aspirations of a people set adrift in space, compounded as an explanation, sometimes as an excuse, for the hard, isolated, inchoate events of existence. In so far as myths thus interpret man they are true, and in so far as they are noble they embrace the elemental meaning of humanity in its full significance, transcending all his other achievements. Carl Sandburg has recognized, as have the people themselves, that in the time of Lincoln there occurred both the hour and the man necessary for a deeply moving drama. To that Sandburg has contributed his part with an infinite and tender understanding.

Your Obt. Servt.

HARBERT, MICH., is a crossroads town about 60 miles east of Chicago across the lake. To get there you have to drive through the gritty desolation of South Chicago, through Gary, where in autumn the blast furnaces at night make a glowering sheet lightning, through the smoke of Michigan City and into clean air again, along Lake Michigan behind some of the biggest sand dunes in the world. Carl Sandburg's place is on top of a dune a mile or so from the Harbert post office. On the land side the house is a triple decker, the top deck open and sunny. The front porch looks over ten miles of beach through the crests of some tall pines. Inside it is the kind of house a good workman likes to have for his family.

Sandburg bought this place eleven years ago, about the time he started work on "The War Years," the second part of his biography of Abraham Lincoln. In the attic he put a stove, a cot, a few chairs and a lot of book shelves. Near a corner window he put his typewriter on an old box whose height suited him. He liked to tell people that if Grant and those fellows could run their war from cracker boxes, a cracker box was good enough for him. This attic and a room on the second floor called the Lincoln Room came in time to resemble second-hand book stores. In the first two years alone Carl Sandburg went through more than a thousand source books and marked them for copyists, of whom he had two at a time working downstairs in the

glassed-in porch. His pretty, white-haired wife, Paula, and three daughters helped with the files. Gutted and exhausted books went to the barn.

From April to October each year Sandburg made no engagements; he sat at his cracker box and wrestled with a bigger job than any army commander ever faced. Fifty years old when he started it, he could summon to his aid a lifetime of singularly useful experience: as a shock-headed Swedish kid in Galesburg, Ill., in the '80s (his father was an immigrant blacksmith) listening to talk of Lincoln and the Civil War; as a harvest hand, a migrant worker, a volunteer in the Spanish-American War; as a young reporter in Milwaukee and Chicago getting ten years of schooling in the hard facts of politics, business, labor; as a poet, a big Swede trying to shape American lingo to fit his anger against bunk artists, his vague tenderness for common people, his sense of the power of U. S. Midland cities.

When the literary history of his time comes to be written, Carl Sandburg may well be esteemed the luckiest of his Midwestern generation. Vachel Lindsay and Edgar Lee Masters had as great if not greater native talent; even Ben Hecht, whose desk was next to Sandburg's on the Chicago *Daily News* in the early '20s, seemed a more brilliant, sophisticated writer. Of them all, Sandburg, the immigrant's son, got the surest roothold in authentic U. S. tradition, and got it perhaps by the near accident of digging for the truth about Abraham Lincoln. "That son-of-a-gun Lincoln grows on you," he once told a reporter. Before he finished "The Prairie Years," which carried the biography to 1861, he had meditated all the basic Lincoln material, had achieved a clear, homely, sometimes lovely style. The greater demands of the Civil War material in range and stamina and subtlety unquestionably deepened and instructed him still further.

Partly from relief from those demands, partly to support

the job, partly to get at libraries and private Lincoln collections throughout the U. S., every winter Carl Sandburg took one of his guitars and went on tour, reading his own poems and singing the ditties and ballads which he collected in 1927 in "The American Songbag." His gifts include a sweet natural baritone, a born entertainer's command of moods and sense of audience, a deep, dreamy self-identification with the homely jigs and haunted lonesome songs of America. Sinclair Lewis once wept at Sandburg's singing of *The Buffalo Skinners*.

Sandburg thus became known to thousands as a folksy singer with a lilting, language-loving voice, a wide, delighted grin and silver hair falling over his eyes. Some people were so careless as to think that that was about all there was to Carl Sandburg—a misapprehension which "The War Years" should thoroughly destroy.

This four-volume biography as it now stands completed is a work whose meanings will not soon be exhausted, whose greatness will not soon be estimated. It can be said that no U. S. biography surpasses it in wealth of documentation and fidelity to fact, that none, not even Douglas Southall Freeman's monumental "R. E. Lee" (*Time*, Oct. 22, 1934; Feb. 11, 1935), can compare with it in strength, scope and beauty. Carl Sandburg himself has a sense of the comparative importance of his other work. His long, loose poem, "The People, Yes" (1936), he calls "my footnote to the last words of the Gettysburg Address." H. L. Mencken believed "The Prairie Years" to be "the best American biography." In relation to "The War Years" it is like a lyric prologue to an inconceivably complex and crowded tragedy.

Great Storm. Each of the first three volumes of "The War Years" is over 650 pages long, the fourth volume 413 pages. By rough computation that makes about 1,175,000 words. Other word totals, as given in Sandburg's foreword:

The Bible, including the Apocrypha	926,877
Shakespeare, complete works	1,025,000
Lincoln's printed speeches and writings	1,078,365

"The War Years" is therefore no week-end biography but a work to be read and studied at leisure, an hour or two a day, over a period of many months. It is a history of the time as well as the man and it is something more than a history in both cases. Meant to tell about everything that anyone would want to know, perhaps half of it consists of quotations—direct quotations from contemporary participants, observers, commentators; from newspapers, diaries, letters and books. "Take that Unionist mountaineer yell," Carl Sandburg says, and gives it: "'For God's sake, let South Carolina nullify, revolute, secesh and be damned!' . . . What historian would dare try to render that in his own words?"

"Many men and women, now faded and gone, lived this book before it could be written," he says in his Foreword. "They do and say in these pages what they did and said in life—as seen and known to the eyes and ears, the mind and spirit, of themselves or other men and women of their own time. . . . What they say by act or deed is often beyond fathoming, because it happened in a time of great storm."

When Sandburg gave his first two volumes a rigorous rewriting in manuscript in 1935, he scaled down four opening chapters on the background of secession into one, making a packed picture of which he suspects "there are some pages over which people will stop and wonder." It was a time of growing violence, growing paradox, growing economic change and bewilderment: "of [Northern] abolitionists hanged, shot, stabbed, mutilated, disfigured facially by vitriol, their home doorways painted with human offal . . . of the 260,000 free Negroes of the South owning property valued at \$25,000,000, one of them being the

wealthiest landowner in Jefferson County, Va. . . . of Southern planters and merchants being \$200,000,000 in debt to the North and chiefly to the money controllers of New York City. . . .”

In the Senate of the United States Senator Louis Wigfall of Texas, an elegant credited with winging his man in eight duels, could face the Northern Senators to say, delicately: “The difficulty between you and us, gentlemen, is, that you will not send the right sort of people here. Why will you not send either Christians or gentlemen?” And Senator Seward of New York, hearing a Louisiana Senator pour on him accusations of bad faith, could remark: “Benjamin, give me a cigar and when your speech is printed send me a copy.”

Telling the story with an even, unemphatic clarity and selective power, Sandburg adds incident to incident, utterance to utterance, personality to personality until he re-creates the wild winter of 1860-61, when the election of Abraham Lincoln, on a platform committed to the limitation of slavery, aroused the fire-eaters of the South to take their States out of the Union. History that is considered an old story takes on new body and quality in such bits as this:

“Amid falling snow at midnight, out of a carriage bundled a mass of shawls and woolen scarfs one winter evening to ring the doorbell at the home of a Virginia Congressman. Inside the house a manservant began unwinding the bundle. Out of it came the Secretary of State, General Lewis Cass, born in 1782, seventy-nine years old, whimpering: ‘Mr. Pryor, I have been hearing about secession for a long time—and I would not listen. But now I am frightened, sir, frightened!’” A month before Lincoln’s inauguration the Confederacy was already under arms. And young Henry Adams wrote to his brother: “No man is fit to take hold now who is not cool as death.”

Old Abe. At 52, his brown face wearing a beard for the first time (no one ever heard him seriously explain why), Lincoln arrived in Washington "like a thief in the night," with one companion, his friends having sent him on ahead to escape a mob in Baltimore. At Columbus on the way he had said in a curious, trance-like speech: "Without a name, perhaps without a reason why I should have a name, there has fallen upon me a task such as did not rest even upon the Father of his Country. . . ."

Carl Sandburg's method with Lincoln is to light up in every way possible the men and the problems he faced from week to week, to relate with exactness what he did and said, to tell in their own words what the contemporaries thought or printed about it (Nicolay & Hay, Lamon, Herndon and the other biographers bearing witness among hundreds less known), and to let his own extraordinary insight play upon the record. As an incidental part of this process, he brings to life the principal political, journalistic and military figures that surrounded Old Abe from his first week in Washington to the end. His extended portrait of Charles Sumner, for example, is masterly.

Above all other men, Senator Sumner of Massachusetts was a scourge and a goad to the South, an exasperation to practical statesmen like Stephen A. Douglas. Handsome, imposing, humorless and incorruptible, Sumner stood in the Senate for years denouncing slaveholders as keepers of a nameless abomination; yet he had nothing whatever to say as to how \$4,000,000,000 in slave property could be liquidated. "He seemed to insist," says Sandburg, "that he could be an insolent agitator and a perfect gentleman both at once. His critics held that he was either a skunk or a white swan but not both." He was the only man of whom Lincoln said, "Sumner thinks he runs me."

William Henry Seward, Lincoln's cigar-chewing Secretary of State, was capable of trying to run the President and also capable of realizing he couldn't. Seward had tried

to stave off war. "Night and day he had conferred and negotiated, become weary and rusty, vulgar and profane beyond his old habits, worn and frazzled as a castoff garment." He had a theory that war between the States could be stopped by getting a war started with some foreign power (Lincoln's observation on this later was "One war at a time"). On April 1 he sent a memorandum to Lincoln embodying this and other suggestions which implied that "Lincoln was a failure as a President but he, Seward, knew how to be one." One of many Lincoln classics is the gentle but ice-cold reply that Seward got, subscribed (without Lincoln's usual abbreviation) "Your obedient servant, A. Lincoln."

Intricacies. The lank man in the White House whom a large section of the press, North and South and in England, referred to as a "gorilla" proved himself through four years of heartbreaking war to be one of the ablest and most subtle statesmen in history. Step by step, chapter & verse, Carl Sandburg sets him forth as indeed the merciful, mystic and benign being of the monuments, but as also—and with profound consistency—a hard, circumspect, far-seeing politician and manager of men. Lincoln's speeches and writings were the work of a remarkably pure human intellect, always questioning, circumscribing the area in which he could be positive, saying once: "In times like the present, men should utter nothing for which they would not willingly be responsible through time and in eternity." His difficulties as they are unfolded in detail seem unbearable, his performance a manual of political behavior for men in any time. Two out of hundreds of instances:

► Lincoln was up against a Congress in which at one time there were just three Representatives defending him. During the bitterest weeks of the war his own family came under suspicion of treason. One of the most awesome scenes in the book is that of the secret meeting which the Senate

Committee on the Conduct of the War held early in 1863 to consider this rumor. A member told of it:

"We had just been called to order by the Chairman, when the officer stationed at the committee room door came in with a half-frightened expression on his face. Before he had opportunity to make explanation, we understood . . . and were ourselves almost overwhelmed with astonishment. For at the foot of the Committee table, standing solitary, his hat in his hand, his form towering, Abraham Lincoln stood." What the Committee member got was "above all an indescribable sense of his [Lincoln's] complete isolation."

"I, Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States," said the caller slowly, "appear of my own volition before this Committee of the Senate to say that I, of my own knowledge, know that it is untrue that any of my family hold treasonable communication with the enemy." He went away. Speechless, the Committee adjourned.

► Against him across the Potomac was an army which could probably have taken Washington in the first weeks of the war, and a commander who outguessed and outfought every Union General. Sandburg on Lee: "Enfolded in the churchman and the Christian gentleman, Robert E. Lee was the ancient warrior who sprang forth and struck and cut and mangled as if to tear the guts and heart out of the enemy. . . ." The Union General George Brinton McClellan, who prudently chose to fight a war of attrition, never meeting Lee if he could help it without overwhelming superiority in manpower, caused Lincoln a long year of anguish. Yet by resisting for months public and political pressure to remove him, Lincoln allowed him to build a great army; by later reappointing him, again against great pressure, he restored to the army the one favorite and familiar commander under whom it had the spirit to beat off Lee at Antietam.

One of Lincoln's exquisite modulations of conduct was

noted in the fact that at army reviews he touched his hat to officers, uncovered to men in the ranks.

Structure. As Sandburg's narrative of war and politics goes on, it gathers such momentum that he can toss in a chapter the length of an ordinary novel, dealing entirely with White House routine, and lose little by it. The look and sound and layout of Washington, the character of battles, the diversity of talk and action over the country emerge as clearly as the central presence of Lincoln, revealed in touches both familiar and unfamiliar (*e.g.*, Emerson's noting that he "showed all his white teeth" when he laughed). On the bitter subject of conscription, North and South, Sandburg gives the fruit of original research. Nothing in the narrative, however, stands out with such power for readers in 1939 as the deep tenacity of Lincoln's efforts: first (vainly) to win the South to gradual, compensated emancipation; then to forestall class and sectional savagery, to maintain representative government in the torn border States (sometimes he seems to have done so by an act of will), to build, even as the war went on, a foundation for "a just and lasting peace."

The execution of the book is not flawless; Sandburg's method of filing and attacking his material by subject as well as by chronological batches seems to have caused a few unconscious repetitions. A few—but very few—allusions will remain unclear to readers who are not students of the period. There is at times a certain bleakness.

This quality, however, is perhaps necessary to the grandeur of the total effect. Sandburg's prose is mostly direct, savored, terse, with scarcely a perfunctory or a pretentious sentence. If it had a smell it would be leaf smoke on an Illinois dirt road in November. Closely knit to the material, it has almost none of the lyric blurring of "The Prairie Years" (where he wrote of Nancy Hanks as "sad with sorrow like dark stars in blue mist"). Because Sandburg has been compared often to Walt Whitman, his mature portrait

of Walt is instructive: "Undersized, with graying whiskers, Quaker-blooded, soft-hearted, sentimental, a little crazy, this Walt Whitman sang to the war years, 'Rise O days, from your fathomless deeps. . . .'"

When Sandburg's eloquence rises to the occasion offered by his story's end, it lifts up toward something by no means common in U. S. writing. The chapter on Lincoln's assassination and death is surgical in the closeness of its reporting, until it breaks—with powerful effect—into one simple, lyrical sentence. Later:

"There was a funeral.

It took long to pass its many given points.

Many millions of people saw it and personally moved in it and were part of its procession.

The line of march ran seventeen hundred miles.

As a dead march nothing like it had ever been attempted before.

Like the beginning and the end of the Lincoln Administration, it had no precedents to go by.

It was garish, vulgar, massive, bewildering, chaotic.

Also it was simple, final, majestic, august. . . .

The people, the masses, nameless and anonymous numbers of persons not listed nor published among those present—these redeemed it.

They gave it the dignity and authority of a sun darkened by a vast bird migration. . . .

They gave it the color and heave of the sea which is the mother of tears. . . ."

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